

Paul Ryan's Road Back to Relevance

Posted: 03/14/2013 10:30 am

It must be springtime. The weather is finally getting warmer, baseball season is almost here and Paul Ryan is presenting a budget proposal which, despite his assurances that it is innovative and reflects new thinking, is little more than a right-wing economic program seeking to balance the budget by cutting expenditures for poor people while doing little or nothing to ask wealthier Americans to do their share.

In the past these budgets have served two major purposes. First, they have helped the Republican Party set the agenda for issues regarding the budget and the deficit, and second they have helped make Paul Ryan a national figure with a reputation as a smart fiscal mind. That, however, was before Ryan was part of the failed Republican ticket last fall. Because of Ryan's role in that defeat, this year's proposed budget is almost entirely about Paul Ryan. It could perhaps most accurately be described as the "make Paul Ryan relevant again budget."

Despite serving as his party's nominee for vice president last year, it appears as though Ryan is already behind his presumed rivals for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016. Marco Rubio and Rand Paul seem to have, at least for now, moved to the head of the pack, while Ryan has not enjoyed much visibility since the election. Rubio has more or less displaced Ryan as the young candidate with the right demographics and personal story, while Paul, due largely to his willingness to apply his anti-government views more broadly than most Republicans, has also emerged as a possibly strong candidate. For Ryan to become relevant for 2016 again he needs to become much more visible, so stressing his budget credentials, for which he is already quite well known, is not a bad idea.

It is also not something that should be taken very seriously in a policy context. Ryan's newest budget is much more about communicating with his party's leadership and activists than about usefully contributing to the policy debate. The budget also reflects the frustration many Republicans feel that despite trying to persuade Americans that the deficit is the single biggest problem facing the country, albeit through a strategy that leaned considerably more towards rhetoric than action, most Americans, including most economists, remain unconvinced.

When Mitt Romney put Paul Ryan on the ticket last year it was, at least in part, because Romney believed the American people supported the Republican view that the debt was the single biggest problem facing the country. While it is always difficult to interpret the policy implications of election outcomes, it is reasonably safe to assert that the American people rejected this argument. This does not mean that the American people, and their president, do not think the deficit is important, but that they believe it is one of a battery of related problems facing the country -- either that or they put no credence in right-wing budget rhetoric, given their commitment not to increase revenue from the richest Americans.

The frustration the Republicans are feeling about this is almost tangible, but more right-wing position-taking cloaked in earnest talk about the deficit will not solve the problem, nor will it get

the attention of the president or most voters. It will, however, excite and mobilize the right-wing activists who are essential for Ryan's presidential aspirations.

In a few weeks, the Republican Party, will undoubtedly cite, rather absurdly, President Obama and the Democrats' failure to embrace or even recognize Ryan's proposals as evidence that the Democrats are not serious about addressing the deficit problem. This has become the normal state of affairs in Washington, but Ryan's latest proposal should be viewed in this context. It is little more than a project of political extremism and personal ambition cloaked in serious policy work.

The difference for Ryan this time is that he may have trouble mobilizing the entire Republican Party around his proposal and the notion that it is significant. Other contenders for the 2016 nomination, notably Rubio and Paul, will not want Ryan to continue unchallenged as the Republican's smartest deficit hawk. Ryan probably realizes that his proposed budget is going nowhere, but failure to win broad support within his own party would be devastating and undermine his reputation as a sharp mind on fiscal issues.

This potential rift between Rubio, Paul, Ryan and perhaps others is a ray of good news for President Obama as it may lead the Republicans to appear to be in a greater state of disarray and to focus their attention on Republican primary voters, rather than on policies that might win broader support. It will also make it harder for Ryan to climb back to relevance regardless of how many draconian budgets he proposes.